THE CHRIST CHILD & The THREE AGES OF MAN

WILLIAM BOYD CARPENTER
BISHOP OF RIPON

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AND THE

THREE AGES OF MAN

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BY
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PROLOGUE

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One said: "We have lost our youth; feebleness marks all, and wisdom has forsaken us. For our young men are no longer content to be young, and our old men possess the follies of youth, and men in the vigour of their days lack stability of purpose and of courage."

And another said: "Our beliefs have lost the vigour of their youth: they are petrified traditions, and no longer living truths: and as for things new, we cannot sustain our souls on the raw guesses of to-day."

Then a third said: "There once shone a star over the cradle at Bethlehem. Men once believed that then all things—thoughts, beliefs,

and the hearts of men—were made new. Would that we could go back there and find renewal of wisdom and of heart!"

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HE darkness was pierced by the light which shone through the windows of the little Inn; thick and profound darkness lay elsewhere, save where, over the low stable, which lay some fifty yards away, a faint lessening of the darkness betokened the coming dawn.

Outside the Rabbi paced up and down, reciting to himself with eager anxiety some portions of the ancient oracles. The Rabbi wished to know the secret of the Most High; he wished also to be kept from breaking the holy law; so he sought to com-

mit to memory whole passages of the sacred books. Had not the Psalmist written: "Thy word have I hid within my heart that I might not sin against thee"? Was it not well and fit then—yea, most prudently wise—that the Rabbi should learn what was written in that Word?

The sound of an approaching caravan broke upon the Rabbi's recitation; from the direction of the dawn came a slow, winding procession of camels and mules. A great star hung in the sky immediately over the lowly Inn. Here the caravan paused; eager slaves rushed to the bridles; three men descended, and approached the door of the Inn. As the door was opened, and a gleam of light fell upon the faces of the newcomers, their features came into view. The Rabbi paused in his murmured recitations, and his glance was arrested by the eldest of the

three visitors. He saw a man upon whom the weight of unnumbered years seemed to rest. Time had silvered his hair, and his beard fell like a snowfall upon his breast; age seemed to have drained the blood from his pallid cheeks, but thought, penetration, sagacity, noble curiosity lit up their fires in his eye. From his searching glance younger men might have shrunk had not a certain wistfulness, as of one who waited and could feel with those who were doomed to wait, brought a subtle tenderness into his face. From this venerable figure the Rabbi glanced at one who stood near—a veritable contrast with the aged man—and he saw youth and age standing side by side; youth with hair of flame and eyes that knew no shrinking from life's riddles and life's deeds; youth alive in every vein and limb—

strong, sceptical of all experience, resolved to live its own life, solve life's problems for itself, joyous to be alive, happy and confident in self. Upon the third figure the Rabbi's eyes rested but a moment. It was the figure of a middle-aged man, and the middle-aged are commonplace; they interest nobody; they are only the toilers of the world—without romance, too old for the visions of hope, too busy for the dreams of memory. What have they to tell that everyone does not know?

Meanwhile the three travellers have turned away from the Inn, have faced the dawn, and are approaching the stable door. After a few words together the old man passed through the stable door, leaving the other two without. The time seemed long, and the Rabbi resumed his recitation of the ancient

law; but after an interval he heard the door open and the voice of the old man speaking in tones of wonder.

"Praised be God," said the aged one, "for that He hath spared me for this hour, to hear such words, to look upon such a face. Was ever such wisdom of experience uttered? All that was in me, and more than all, He told me: it was as though I held converse with a brother, a wiser and an elder brother."

"What saying is this?" exclaimed the other. "An elder brother! He is born but as yesterday. The star! — the star made that clear."

"Nay," said the old man, "of that I know nothing. I have seen, I have heard, I am satisfied. The Ancient of Days and the Wisdom of the Ages—yea, of the eternal God—is behind that door. Go in,

my brother — go in and see. It is wonderful! Praise God, Who kept me for this hour!"

The middle-aged man entered the stable door, while the old man kept repeating in the young man's ear his wonder and his joy, and the Rabbi resumed his recitations of the ancient law.

And now the middle-aged man came forth, and he also lifted up his voice in wonder of the things he had seen and heard.

"This," he said, "is a man indeed: no prolix dreamings of age nor rash imaginings of youth are with him, but sober sense and practical wisdom — well-balanced, without sentiment or romance—duty—work and God! Ah! what a world would ours be were it guided by the stalwart sense of that bronze-bearded man."

"Thou hast not seen him," cried

the old man. "He whom I saw and who spoke such wisdom was venerable as the Ancient of Days, with hair like wool, and his eyes like fire."

"Not such I saw," returned the other. "I talked with him as with a man of mine own age, who knew what toil was, and who would meet life with matured vigour of body and of brain. None else is there."

"All dreams," said the old man. "Go in, my son"—he said, turning to the young man. "Go in, my son, and see the most wise and venerable among the aged."

The young man disappeared. Silence fell outside the stable, save for the low murmur of the Rabbi reading the precepts of the ancient law.

Presently the door opened, and the young man came forth. To the eager question of the other two

he at first returned no answer, but stood for a while silent, as one amazed. Then when they continued asking him he spoke as one who wakened from a dream: "Visions! such visions as I have seen. I entered. I saw a youth—it might have been myself—but that he was so divinely fair and that in his eyes dwelt a wisdom such as I have never seen in youth's eyes. Then I forgot to look upon him more; for when he spoke I saw what life might indeed be; I felt how glorious to live, how well worth while it would be to die to win a life of such potency and purpose! Oh! I know no more; he has put a fire in my heart and a vision before my eyes."

Then those three men stood bewildered, and in silence. And the Rabbi drew near, for the thing seemed strange. The three men

greeted the Rabbi with respect, and told their story.

And the Rabbi questioned them.

He asked the aged man: "What didst thou see?"

And the aged man answered: "I saw within a man of old, as it might be myself, but much more venerable."

"And none else?" asked the Rabbi.

"None else but he alone was there," replied the old man.

The Rabbi then asked the middle-aged man: "What didst thou see?"

And the middle-aged man answered even as the aged man had done, and said: "A man strong, and fit for toil even as myself, but built in nobler mould."

"And none else?" asked the Rabbi.

"None else but he alone was there," replied the middle-aged man.

The Rabbi then questioned the

young man: "And what didst thou see?"

And the young man answered even as the other two had done, and said: "A youth even as myself, but fairer and much better favoured."

"And none else?" asked the Rabbi.

"None else but he alone was there," replied the young man.

"This is a mystery," said the Rabbi.

And the three replied: "It is, as thou sayest, a mystery."

"Let us go in again," said the old man, "and this time let us go together, so that all may be made clear beyond dispute and doubt; and, that we may not be misled by our vision, wilt thou, O Rabbi, go in with us?"

Then all four entered, and lo! the stable was empty save for a young maiden, who bore upon her lap a little Child.

"Only a little Child," said the Rabbi.

"Where is the venerable man I saw here a while ago?" asked the old man.

"There hath no old man been here," replied the virgin; "only the Child and I have been here these many hours."

"Where is the strong and stalwart man whom I spake with so short a time since?" asked the middle-aged man.

"There hath been no man here save the Babe and I these many hours," replied the maiden.

"I am answered too," spake the youth. "Hath no youth been here?"

"No youth hath been here save thyself," said the maiden; "only the Child and I have been here these many hours."

"None else?" they asked.

"None else; only the Child and I," said the maiden again.

"Only a little Child," said the Rabbi again; "only a little Child."

And they passed out, to find that the morning was awake.

"It is a mystery," said the old man as they stood with their faces to the new-risen day. "Can the young become old in a moment? It is but a child, but I saw an old man. Can a child in a moment become old?"

"Nay," said the Rabbi; "but the old may become young; for they that wait on the Lord may renew their youth."

And then the young man spake: "It is a mystery, and yet what one sees one sees from oneself. Who knows what I have seen?"

"Yea," said the Rabbi; "and it is written, 'your young men shall see visions.'"

"And yet it is a mystery," said the middle-aged man; "for

how could I mistake childhood for strength?"

"But," said the Rabbi, "it is written, 'a little child shall lead them.'"

"It is true," said the old man. "And perchance childhood may be wiser than age, stronger than manhood, keener than youth to see visions, and fitter than all to enter into the kingdom of God."

Then the caravan departed, wending its way towards the East again.

And the Rabbi climbed the hills that overlooked Bethlehem. He recited no more the passages of the ancient law: Targum and Mishna—yes, and Torah—seemed to grow little to him as he sat upon the hillside and became wrapt in thought. And at last, as the sun rose to his mid-day height and the shadows disappeared, the Rabbi sprang to his feet, and said: "Is

it so that a child can hold, nay, be in itself, a message for all ages? Is it so that we never can transcend the wisdom of a childlike heart, nor the strength of childlike purpose, nor the visions of the childlike soul? It may be so. I do remember how one in the ancient songs declared: 'I am wiser than the aged because I keep Thy commandments.' And I mind me, too, how the leprous Naaman had his flesh made clean and fresh as the flesh of a little child. Verily, I think God teaches us more by life than by books, more by infancy than by Hillel and Shammah or all the Rabbins. He showed His glory to Moses on the mountain, perchance He may reveal Himself to us in a little Child. I will get me down from the hill again, that I may learn what wisdom lies in the Cradle of Bethlehem."

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

I sought for wisdom,
And from grey hairs I sought it;
I found it not;
But from a child I caught it.
Experience dwells in aged eyes,
Where hard-won knowledge garnered lies;
But only age which hath grown young
Bears living wisdom on its tongue.

I sought for strength,
From manly thews I sought it;
I found it not;
But by a child was taught it.

Yet dwells not strength in manly
thews?
Are iron muscles little use?
Low down in life they play a part
Without the strength of childhood's
heart.

I sought my dreams,
My early dreams I sought them:
I found them not;
But smiling childhood brought them.
Ah! dear dead dreams of life's pure
spring
Who will revive the magic ring?
Yet more than magic near us lies,
Who see our dreams in childhood's
eyes.

There yet is wisdom in a child
To soothe the sad and tame the wild,
Into new life youth's visions start
For him who bears a childlike heart.

Dear Christ, who goest seeking rest
In human hearts, be Thou our guest,
Dear Lord of Christmas and of pain,
Thou art our childhood back again.

By the LORD BISHOP of RIPON

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